

Willingness to Defend Estonia: Fostered by Civil-Military Integration and Communication

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Will to defend one's own country is of multifold importance in Estonia, and it may mean more in legal, practical, and cognitive ways than is usual elsewhere. First of all, the article 54 of the Estonian Constitution states: "Estonian citizens have a duty to be loyal to the constitutional order and to defend the independence of Estonia."¹ Obviously, if the will were absent, it would be impossible for the state to enforce this duty on every single citizen.

Secondly, the practical importance of the will to defend is connected to the defence system used in Estonia – there is compulsory military service for all male citizens that features fighting training. In the case of war these reservists would be mobilized in order to bolster existing units and from reserve ones. Such a system could not be implemented unless the people were willing to go through the military service or to join their units in the case of mobilization. Additionally, some defence tasks are carried out by the Defence League, a voluntary organization.

Thirdly, people think that defending one's own country is important. According to public opinion polls, when people were asked to name the strongest guarantees of the security of the country, "defence willingness of people" was in solid second place, losing only to "membership in NATO".² The same notion has been shared by high-ranking defence officials.³

The popular knowledge shared also by opinion of Estonian press is that the will to defend is "high" in the country. Although this notion does not

necessarily have to be wrong, it raises some following questions this article tries to answer: How the will to defend is defined and measured in Estonia? What are the results and dynamics of the results over time? Finally, the most sophisticated question: What are the reasons and processes behind such results? While first three questions are answerable based on earlier literature and public opinion polls, in the case of the last question, establishing, not to mention proving, all the causal relationships may prove to be overcomplicated. Therefore, in addition to consultation of earlier studies, a focus group and more essayistic approach was used.

There are different options for defining will to defend (or in other words: will to fight for one's own country). In Estonian usually the term "kaitsetahe" is used, which literally translates to English as "will to defend". Although it is used in various strategy documents, it has not been defined there. According to a practitioner researching the issue, the definition best applicable for Estonia would be "will of every individual to defend his/her country".⁴ It can be divided into active (readiness to personally participate in armed resistance) and passive (general approval of resistance in the case of foreign aggression) willingness to defend.⁵

Measuring the will to defend in Estonia

The mainstay of measuring the will to defend is the "Public opinion on national defence" – a poll conducted on the order of Ministry of Defence for more than 20 years. During the period of 2000–2006 the survey was conducted trice a year, since 2007, twice a year. The planned sample has always been 1000, the methodology and questions similar and comparable, although some alternations and adding more questions has been necessary. Reports of the surveys conducted since 2001 are freely available on the website of the Ministry of Defence in Estonian, reports since 2012 are also available in English.⁶ In current questionnaires there are 51 questions on the subject matter plus 18 questions on background of the respondent.⁷ In addition to the will to defend, a wide set of opinions on security is asked.

The reports contain a comparison of data going back to 2000 and serve as a solid basis for both academic and public discussion. However, there are some limitations.

Firstly, the most obvious limitation is that gathering of data only started in 2000. Therefore, research on public opinion on the defence issues during the first nine years after regaining Estonia's independence cannot be conducted with the same accuracy as during the later period. There have been attempts to overcome the problem by using other data, and, in the case of Estonia, these have led researchers to use the European Values Survey 1990.⁸ Data gathering for that survey in Estonia was conducted 1 June to 30 August 1990.⁹ The approach poses some problems, since at that time Estonia was still occupied by Soviet forces and had no military power of its own. What did the respondents have in mind while asked of their "confidence in armed forces"? It is complicated to figure it out 30 years later and even more so to compare it with more recent data.

Secondly, although the questionnaire is rather long – that also means time-consuming for the respondent and resource consuming for the customer – there may always be some more questions of interest for academic study. In such cases additional (sometimes *ad hoc*) surveys are conducted, but this cannot be done retrospectively. The largest of them is the survey of persons going through their compulsory military service that saw light for the first time in 2016.¹⁰ Smaller surveys concerning different aspects of the will to defend have been executed as a part of BA¹¹ or MA¹² studies at universities or as a part of higher-level officer training.¹³

In addition to the polls, there are other indicators of the will to defend. Some of them are easily measurable, like the percentage of conscripts entering the service as volunteers. Some others are also measurable, but the data is not easily available in the public domain, like the percentage of reservists showing up for the annual planned or snap military exercises.

Others may be a bit more indirect, but still showing something. After the Russian-speaking pro-Communist hardliners' coup d'état attempt in Tallinn on 15 May 1990, there was an influx of volunteers to the newly formed Home Guard and Border Guard, the same way there was an influx of members to Defence League and Volunteer Police after riots in Tallinn on 26–27 April 2007. An even more drastic example may be August 1991, when estimated 2000 thousand volunteers of Home Guard and Defence League were ready to face the additional Soviet troops entering Estonia from the direction of Pskov. They had almost no firearms and lacked structure, equipment, and

training – one might argue they did not have much except the will to defend. Although such events do not show any long-time trends, they probably show the heightened will to defend during troubled times for the country.

Results of the survey “Public opinion on national defence”

The overall dynamics of the will to defend of Estonia’s population are probably best demonstrated by the Figure 1.

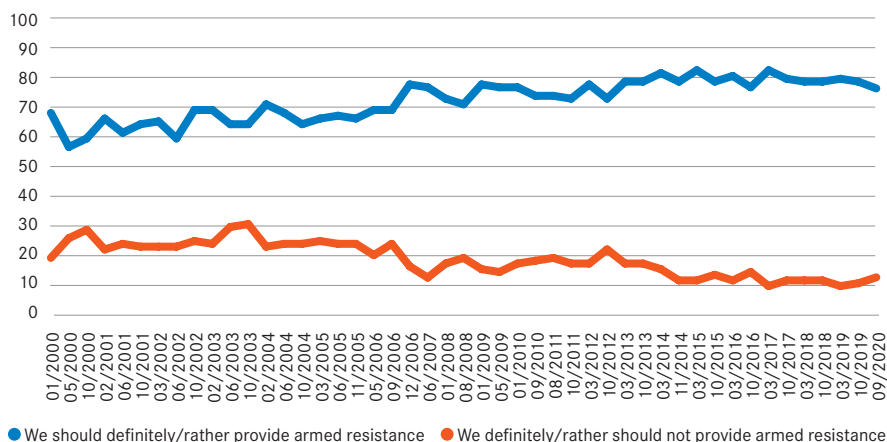


Figure 1: Assessments of the need to provide armed resistance, comparison of 2000–2020 (percent, n=all respondents) (surveys ordered by the Estonian Ministry of Defence).¹⁴

In order to understand the numbers, a timeline of security related events in Estonia and the region is helpful. The reason for starting the surveys was the process of Estonia becoming a NATO member, however, the threat picture was not the same as two decades later. By 2000, Russia was not aggressive towards the West or Estonia (although maybe cold towards the latter) and its military resources were limited, struggling inside its own borders in Chechnya, not invading any neighbours.

Since 2003, Estonian Defence Forces widened their foreign missions to Iraq (platoon until 2009) and Afghanistan (in 2006–2014 there was a company serving there), over the years 11 EDF personnel were killed in

action and 130 were wounded or injured.¹⁵ In 2004, Estonia became a full member of NATO. In 2007, pro-Russian riots took place in Tallinn and the country faced cyber-attacks from the same source.¹⁶ In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. There were also some positive news regarding security – in 2014, NATO air policing fighters arrived to Ämari AFB in Estonia to stay and 150 US soldiers were temporarily stationed in Estonia. In 2016, the decision was made during NATO summit to position Enhanced Forward Presence troops in Estonia, that arrived at Tapa Military Base in spring 2017.

Not all of the abovementioned events have had detectable traces on Figure 1. Still, some heightened alertness seems to be detectable in 2006–2007 and 2013–2014, since when the level of the will to defend has remained constantly high.

Although the perception of security of Estonians and representatives of other nationalities (mainly Russian-speakers) may be different, the number of supporters of armed resistance among them do not differ drastically, at some point in 2006 and 2013 non-Estonians even surpassing Estonians, see Figure 2. Again, the numbers are rather stable since 2014, however, the reasons for earlier changes in the public mood remain unknown.

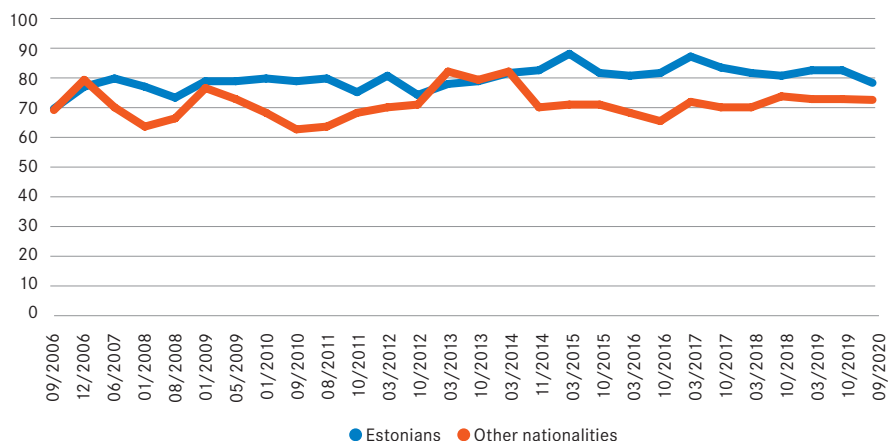


Figure 2: Proportion of supporters of armed resistance, comparison of Estonians and non-Estonians, 2006-2020 (percent of respondents considering armed resistance definitely and probably necessary, n=all respondents) (surveys ordered by the Estonian Ministry of Defence).¹⁷

The two figures presented above speak of the passive will to defend. The survey also monitors the active will to defend. Figure 3 shows the results making distinction between ethnic Estonians, Estonian citizens who are not ethnic Estonians, and others. As one can notice, the numbers of people willing to actively participate are considerably lower than those on the previous figure supporting the fighting in principle. In this context, it is worth mentioning that according to Estonian legislation only citizens have to serve in the armed forces. Therefore, although the non-citizens have some will to defend, they are not trained for it.

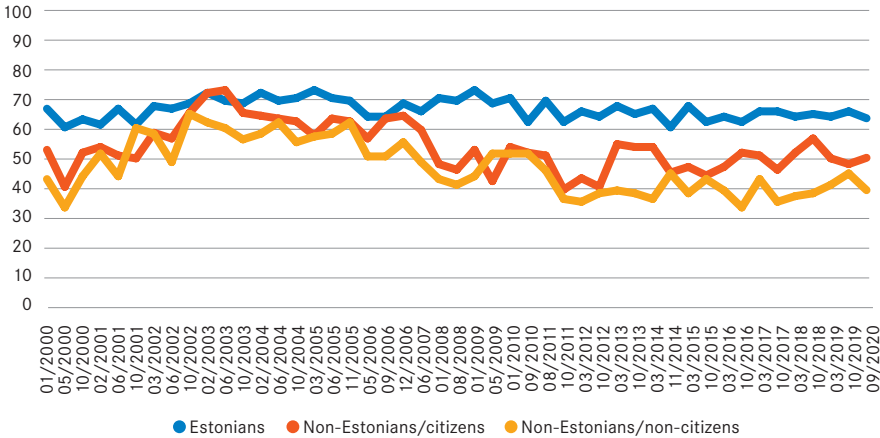


Figure 3: Proportion of residents willing to participate in defence activities in the case of an attack, comparison of Estonian and non-Estonian speaking residents, 2000–2020 (percent of respondents definitely or probably willing to participate, n=all respondents) (surveys ordered by the Estonian Ministry of Defence).¹⁸

Finally, results with most practical utility from the military perspective, according to Estonian legislation, a person liable for national defence obligation is “a male person between the ages of 18 and 60 years”.¹⁹ Table 1 shows will to defend of those who are trained and would be expected to do so. Although among Estonians the results are higher than among non-ethnic-Estonians, both seem to be fairly high, although not at the same level as the number of overall supporters of military resistance.

Category	All age groups	15–34 years of age	35–49 years of age	50–64 years of age	65+ years of age
Men of Estonian nationality with Estonian citizenship	74,4	70,6	80,6	79,1	65,9
Men of other nationalities with Estonian citizenship*	64,1	61,5	66,7	68,8	50,0
All men with Estonian citizenship	72,8	69,4	78,8	77,3	63,5

Table 1: Proportion of people willing to participate in defence activities in the case of attack among men with Estonian citizenship by age and nationality, autumn 2020 (survey ordered by the Estonian Ministry of Defence) (percent).²⁰

Although these numbers never have and hopefully never will be tested, they seem to be high enough to make mobilised EDF a credible deterrent.

Possible reasons for survey results

In 1993, the Head of the General Staff [and de facto Chief of Defence] Colonel [and later 4-star General] Ants Laaneots was asked by journalist on the issue of will in the following wording: “General Laidoner [C-in-C 1934–1940] considered the state’s will to defend to be the basis of the state’s defence capability. Does Estonia have enough of it now?” Laaneots answered with a gloomy face:

“Today it would be an overstatement to say that people’s will to defend is on the appropriate level. The will of Estonian people in years 1938, 1939, 1940 and later cannot be compared with the one today. This is probably the legacy of our slave psychology, which has come due to this 52-year occupation, and as this inertia, this mood is passed on. It is still the case today that many citizens, both male and female, do not realize that we are an independent country and nobody except ourselves is going to defend us. Patriotism, a sense of responsibility towards one’s homeland, which is especially developed among, say, young men in the Scandinavian countries, we have not reached it yet, and it is probably a long process to get there.”²¹

This quote was used as a starting point for a focus group (FG) of four experienced practitioners of the field to discuss the undercurrents of Estonia's will to defend in three last decades, and the following conclusions are based on the results of the group.²² It adds considerably to basic timeline sketched in previous subchapter.

Besides many socio-economic reasons behind the low will to defend in 1990ies, the FG pointed out the low perception of threat based on philosophy – interpretation of Francis Fukuyama's ideas as the end of history with the good winning was popular also in Estonia. Additionally, in the criminal turmoil of 1990, some EDF or Defence League members attracted the media interest because of criminal activities or consuming alcohol while on duty. In 1997, there was a tragedy of 14 soldiers getting killed in one accident during peace-time training. The First Chechen War starting in 1994 raised the sense of threat only moderately. On the other hand, the first positive trends also started in the same decade, like reserve officer courses for student lasting for three summers (1996–1998) and reserve exercises involving VIP-s.

The reserve military in general disrupts the borders between the armed forces and civilian society – most males go to the military service and later return to the society with more knowledge, also the reserve officers spread understanding of military affairs among civilians and vice versa. These processes are made even smoother by vocational military education in high schools. In the same context the Higher Defence Courses must be mentioned, organised for opinion leaders and decision makers since 1999.

Popularity of the military has been upgraded by its help to civilians in crises. Most publicly known is the deployment of field hospital with military personnel to the island of Saaremaa during the hight of Covid-19 crisis in Spring 2020, but the military has also participated in saving the plane after a crash landing on the ice of Lake Ülemiste next to Tallinn airport in 2010, and in other minor cases.

Last not least, the communication efforts of the military have been effective. The first large campaigns like “Conscription is an Honour”²³ (since 2000) and “Father defends” (since 2003, jointly with police) started already long ago and have changed significantly.

The importance of history and its popularity after regaining independence in the formation of the will to defend should not be underestimated. The War

of Independence of 1918–1920 showed, that even Russia is beatable if the will is strong. The Soviet-initiated Communist coup d'état attempt in 1924 showed that there are some dangers even during – seemingly – peace time. The silent submission of 1939 left a shadow of shame (although Finland managed to remain independent through fighting) and occupations of 1940–1991 showed what happens to those who do not fight.

A part of the historical heritage is also the volunteer culture, Defence League having the most impact. The military is also traditionally involved in celebrations of the two most important national holidays, with EDF parade on 24 February (Independence Day of 1918) and Defence League Parade on 23 June (Victory Day of 1919). The survival of historical heritage has been supported by cinema productions and TV series, to a lesser extent by literature. The film “Names in Marble”²⁴ (2002), based on 1936 novel depicting the battle route of volunteer schoolboys battalion during the War of Independence breaking battles of January 1919, has had the highest impact.

Historical memory is also preserved by war memorials all over the country and the museums, such as the Estonian War Museum in Tallinn and the Permanent Exhibition of the Patriotic Education in Valga.

Conclusions

The will to defend is a complex phenomenon. For Estonia it has a high practical meaning, making its reserve military operational and deterrence credible. Luckily for Estonia this phenomenon is rather precisely and frequently measured for already more than two decades. The current numbers – last poll available during preparation of this article is from September 2020 – are encouraging. However, there are still some problems remaining, like the gap in the will to defend between ethnic Estonians and their other compatriots.

The blank spot in the knowledge on the will to defend are the 1990ies. Since frequent polls with sound methodology were not conducted at the time, it would be a complex task to provide any final conclusions on that period.

The reasons behind the relatively high will to defend are more debatable. In addition to the events in the field of security and the overall threat picture,

the experts in the focus group also saw the importance of the integration of military and civilian sector caused by the reserve military system and overall conscription, the visibility of NATO, education in high schools and among opinion leaders, military public affairs activities and, last but not least – historical heritage.

Compared to Latvia and Lithuania, the will to defend seems to be higher in Estonia according to available data. There is no single and easily identifiable reason behind these differences. On one hand, explaining everything with differences in national psyche would be short-sighted and far from academic approach. On the other hand, the security concerns of the three countries are similar and have been so for already a century. These countries are similar in many other respects as well, although Estonia's nominal per capita GDP is slightly higher, considering some other measurable factors the countries have rather similar scores and ranking in the United Nations Human Development Index – Estonia ranks 29, Lithuania 34 and Latvia 37 among 189 countries.²⁵

The only obvious difference between the countries is in the military system. Latvia abolished conscription in 2007, Lithuania in the period between 2008 and 2015, while in Estonia conscription has been constant. This has had positive influence on the will to defend inside the Estonian society. There may also be some geographical reasons, like Estonia being more influenced by Nordic Countries, especially Finland where the will to defend has traditionally been high.²⁶ It is possible that the communication of defence issues has been more successful in Estonia, or maybe some historical reasons contribute to the data. Probably only a detailed survey of different aspects on the will to defend simultaneously and with the same methodology in all three countries could provide a clearer understanding.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁶ For more details, see: Ivo Juurvee, and Mariita Mattiisen. The Bronze Soldier Crisis of 2007: Revisiting an Early Case of Hybrid Conflict. ICDS Report, August 2020, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ICDS_Report_The_Bronze_Soldier_Crises_of_2007_Juurvee_Mattiisen_August_2020.pdf.
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- ¹⁸ Turu-uuringute, Avalik arvamus riigikaitsest. Aruanne Kaitseministeeriumile, 45.
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- ²⁰ Turu-uuringute, Avalik arvamus riigikaitsest. Aruanne Kaitseministeeriumile, 44.
- ²¹ “Eesti kaitse” [Defence of Estonia]. Documentary directed by Andres Sööt, Tallinnfilm 1993, 6’18” – 7’40”.
- ²² Focus group led by the author took place on 3 September 2021 in Tartu and consisted of four experienced practitioners of the field: LTC Uku Arold, Deputy Head of the Strategic Communication Department of EDF General Staff; LTC(R) Jaanus Sägi, retired officer of EDF; Dr. Igor Kopõtin, Chair of Strategy and Innovation at the Estonian Military Academy; Dr. Vladimir Sazonov, Researcher at the University of Tartu and Estonian Academy of Security Studies.

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